

How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army in the Siege of Savannah, 1779

The American Negro Academy. Occasional Papers No. 5
T. G. Steward

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS, No. 5.

The American Negro Academy,

Rev. ALEXANDER CRUMMELL, Founder.

HOW THE

Black St. Domingo Legion

SAVED THE PATRIOT ARMY

IN THE

Siege of Savannah, 1779,

BY T. G. STEWARD, U. S. A.

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How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army in the Siege of Savannah, 1779.

The siege and attempted reduction of Savannah by the combined French and American forces is one of the events of our revolutionary war, upon which our historians care little to dwell. Because it reflects but little glory upon the American arms, and resulted so disastrously to the American cause, its important historic character and connections have been allowed to fade from general sight; and it stands in the ordinary school text-books, much as an affair of shame. The following, quoted from Barnes' History, is a fair sample of the way in which it is treated:

“French-American Attack on Savannah.—In September, D’Estaing joined Lincoln in besieging that city. After a severe bombardment, an unsuccessful assault was made, in which a thousand lives were lost. Count Pulaski was mortally wounded. The simple-hearted Sergeant Jasper died grasping the banner^[1] presented to his regiment at Fort Moultrie. D’Estaing refused to give further aid; thus again deserting the Americans when help was most needed.”

From this brief sketch the reader is at liberty to infer that the attack was unwise if not fool-hardy; that the battle was unimportant; and that the conduct of Count D’Estaing immediately after the battle was unkind if not unjust, to the Americans. While the paragraph does not pretend to tell the whole truth, what it does tell ought to be the truth; and this ought to be told in such a way as to give correct impressions. The attack upon Savannah was well-planned and thoroughly well considered; and it failed only because the works were so ably defended, chiefly by British regulars, under brave and skillful officers. In a remote way, which it is the purpose of this paper to trace, that sanguinary struggle had a wider bearing upon the progress of liberty in the Western World than any other one battle fought during the Revolution.

But first let us listen to the story of the battle itself. Colonel Campbell with a force of three thousand men, captured Savannah in December 1778; and in the January following, General Prevost arrived, and by March had established a sort of civil government in Georgia, Savannah being the capital. In April, the American general, Lincoln, feeble in more senses than one, perhaps, began a movement against Savannah by way of Augusta; but Prevost, aware of his

purpose, crossed into South Carolina and attempted an attack upon Charleston. Finding the city too well defended, he contented himself with ravaging the plantations over a wide extent of adjacent country, and returned to Savannah laden with rich spoils, among which were included three thousand slaves, of whose labor he made good use later.

The patriots of the South now awaited in hope the coming of the French fleet; and on the first of September, Count D'Estaing appeared suddenly on the coast of Georgia with thirty-three sail, surprised and captured four British war-ships, and, announced to the government of South Carolina his readiness to assist in the recapture of Savannah. He urged as a condition, however, that his ships should not be detained long off so dangerous a coast, as it was now the hurricane season, and there was neither harbor, road, nor offing for their protection.

By means of small vessels sent from Charleston he effected a landing in ten days, and four days thereafter, on the 16th, he summoned the garrison to surrender to the arms of France. Although this demand was made in the name of France for the plain reason that the American army was not yet upon the spot, the loyalists did not fail to make it a pretext for the accusation that the French were desirous of making conquests in the war on their own account. In the meantime Lincoln with the regular troops, was hurrying toward Savannah, and had issued orders for the militia to rendezvous at the same place; and the militia full of hope of a speedy, if not of a bloodless conquest, were entering upon this campaign with more than ordinary enthusiasm.

During the time that the fleet had been off the coast, and especially since the landing, the British had been very busy in putting the city in a high state of defence, and in making efforts to strengthen the garrison. Lieutenant-colonel Cruger, who had a small force at Sunbury, the last place in Georgia that had been captured by the British, and Lieutenant-colonel Maitland who was commanding a considerable force at Beaufort, were ordered to report in haste with their commands at Savannah. On the 16th, when the summons to surrender was received by Prevost, Maitland had not arrived, but was hourly expected. Prevost asked for a delay of twenty-four hours to consider the proposal, which delay was granted; and on that very evening, Maitland with his force arrived at Dawfuskie. Finding the river in the possession of the French, his course for a time seemed effectually cut off. By the merest chance he fell in with some Negro fishermen who informed him of a passage known as Wall's cut, through Scull's creek, navigable for small boats. A favoring tide and a dense fog enabled him to conduct his command unperceived by the French, through this route, and thus

arrive in Savannah on the afternoon of the 17th, before the expiration of the twenty-four hours. General Prevost had gained his point; and now believing himself able to resist an assault, declined the summons to surrender. Two armed ships and four transports were sunk in the channel of the river below the city, and a boom in the same place laid entirely across the river; while several small boats were sunk above the town, thus rendering it impossible for the city to be approached by water.

**MAP SHOWING MAITLAND'S COURSE FROM DAWFUSKIE TO
SAVANNAH.**

**1—SPRINGHILL REDOUBT. 2—FRENCH RESERVE. 3—COUNT
PULASKI'S COURSE. 4—HUGER'S FEINT. 5—DILLON'S COURSE. 6
—OBSTRUCTIONS.**

On the day of the summons to surrender, although the works were otherwise well advanced, there were not ten cannon mounted in the lines of Savannah; but from that time until the day of assault, the men of the garrison, with the slaves they had captured, worked day and night to get the defences of the city in the highest state of excellence. Major Moncrief, chief of the engineers, is credited with placing in position more than eighty cannons in a short time after the call to surrender had been received.

The city itself at this time was but a mere village of frame buildings and unpaved streets. Viewed as facing its assailants, it was protected in its rear, or upon its north side, by the Savannah river; and on its west side by a thick swamp or morass, which communicated with the river above the city. The exposed sides were those of the east and south. These faced an open country which for several

miles was entirely clear of woods. This exposed portion of the city was well protected by an unbroken line of defences extending from the river back to the swamp, the right and left extremes of the line consisting of strong redoubts, while the centre was made up of seamen's batteries in front, with impalements and traverses thrown up to protect the troops from the fire of the besiegers. The whole extent of the works was faced with an ample abattis.

To be still more particular: there were three redoubts on the right of the line, and on the right of them quite near the swamp, was a sailor's battery of nine pounders, covered by a company of the British legion. The left redoubt of these three, was known as the Springhill redoubt; and proved to be the objective of the final assault. Between it and the centre, was another sailor's battery behind which were posted the grenadiers of the 60th regiment, with the marines which had been landed from the warships. On the left of the line near the river were two redoubts, strongly constructed, with a massy frame of green spongy wood, filled in with sand, and mounted with heavy cannon. The centre, or space between these groups of redoubts, was composed, as has been said, of lighter but nevertheless very effective works, and was strongly garrisoned.

Having thus scanned the works, let us now take a glance at the men who are to defend them. As all of the assaulting forces are not made up of Americans, so all of the defenders are not foreigners. The centre redoubt of the triplet on the right, was garrisoned by two companies of militia, with the North Carolina regiment to support them; Captains Roworth and Wylie, with the provincial corps of King's Rangers, were posted in the redoubt on the right; and Captain Tawse with his corps of provincial dragoons, dismounted, in the left or Springhill redoubt, supported by the South Carolina regiment. The whole of this force on the right of the line, was under the command of the gallant Lieutenant-colonel Maitland; and it was this force that made the charge that barely failed of annihilating the American army. On the left of the line, the Georgia loyalists garrisoned one of those massy wooden sand-filled redoubts; while in the centre, cheek by jowl so to speak, with two battalions of the seventy-first regiment, and two regiments of Hessians, stood the New York Volunteers. All of these corps were ready to act as circumstances should require and to support any part of the line that might be attacked. The Negroes who worked on these defences were under the direction of Major Moncrief.

The French troops had landed below the city and were formed facing the British lines, with the river on their right. On their left, later, assembled the American troops. The final dispositions were concluded by September 22nd, and were as

follows: The American troops under Lincoln formed the left of the line, their left resting upon the swamp and the entire division facing the Springhill redoubt and her two sister defences; then came the division of M. de Noailles, composed of nine hundred men. D'Estaing's division of one thousand men beside the artillery, came next, and formed the centre of the French army. On D'Estaing's right was Count Dillon's division of nine hundred men; on the right of Dillon were the powder magazine, cattle depot, and a small field hospital; on the right of the depot and a little in advance, were Dejean's dragoons, numbering fifty men; upon the same alignment and to the right of the dragoons were Rouvrais' Volunteer Chasseurs, numbering seven hundred and fifty men; still further on to the right and two hundred yards in advance of Rouvrais, was Framais, commanding the Grenadier Volunteers, and two hundred men besides, his right resting upon the swampy wood that bordered the river, thus completely closing in the city on the land side. The frigate, La Truite, and two galleys, lay within cannon shot of the town, and with the aid of the armed store ship, La Bricole, and the frigate, La Chimere, effectually cut off all communication by water.

On the 23rd, both the French and the Americans opened their trenches; and on the 24th, a small detachment of the besieged made a sortie against the French. The attack was easily repulsed, but the French pursuing, approached so near the entrenchments of the enemy that they were fired upon and several were killed. On the night of the 27th another sortie was made which threw the besiegers into some confusion and caused the French and Americans to fire upon each other. Cannonading continued with but little result until October 8th.

The engineers were now of the opinion that a speedy reduction of the city could not be accomplished by regular approaches; and the naval officers were very anxious about the fleet, both because of the dangers to which it was exposed from the sea, and also because, with so many men ashore it was in especial danger of being attacked and captured by British men-of-war. These representations agreeing altogether with D'Estaing's previously expressed wishes to leave the coast as soon as possible, induced that officer and General Lincoln to decide upon an attempt to storm the British works at once. It is quite probable that this had been the purpose as a last resort from the first. The preservation of the fleet was, however, the powerful factor in determining the time and character of the assault upon Savannah.

On the night of the eighth, Major L'Enfant, with a detachment attempted to set fire to the abattis in order to clear the way for the assault, but failed through the dampness of the wood. The plan of the assault may be quite accurately obtained

from the orders given to the American troops on the evening of the 8th by General Lincoln and from the inferences to be drawn from the events of the morning of the 9th as they are recorded in history. At least two of the historians who have left us accounts of the siege, Ramsey and McCall, were present at the time, and their accounts may be regarded as original authority. General Lincoln's orders were as follows:

“Evening Orders. By General Lincoln.
Watchword—Lewis.

“The soldiers will be immediately supplied with 40 rounds of cartridges, a spare flint, and have their arms in good order. The infantry destined for the attack of Savannah will be divided into two bodies; first composed of the light troops under the command of Colonel Laurens; the second, of the continental battalions and the first battalion of the Charleston militia, except the grenadiers, who are to join the light troops. The whole will parade at 1 o'clock, near the left of the line, and march by platoons. The guards of the camp will be formed of the invalids, and be charged to keep the fires as usual, in camp.

“The cavalry under the command of Count Pulaski, will parade at the same time with the infantry and follow the left column of the French troops, precede the column of the American light troops; they will endeavor to penetrate the enemy's lines between the battery on the left of Springhill redoubt, and the next towards the river; having effected this, will pass to the left towards Yamacraw and secure such parties of the enemy as may be lodged in that quarter.

“The artillery will parade at the same time, follow the French artillery, and remain with the *corps de reserve* until they receive further orders.

“The whole will be ready by the time appointed, with the utmost silence and punctuality; and be ready to march the instant Count Dillon and General Lincoln shall order.

“The light troops who are to follow the cavalry, will attempt to enter the redoubt on the left of the Springhill, by escalade if possible; if not by entrance into it, they are to be supported if necessary by the first South Carolina regiment; in the meantime the column will proceed with the lines to the left of the Springhill battery.

“The light troops having succeeded against the redoubt will proceed to the left and attempt the several works between that and the river.

“The column will move to the left of the French troops, taking care not to interfere with them.

“The light troops having carried the work towards the river will form on the left of the column.

“It is especially forbidden to fire a single gun before the redoubts are carried; or for any soldier to quit his rank to plunder without an order for that purpose; any who shall presume to transgress in either of these respects shall be reputed a disobeyer of military orders which is punishable with death.

“The militia of the first and second brigades, General Williamson’s and the second battalion of the Charleston militia will parade immediately under the command of General Huger; after draughting five hundred of them the remainder of them will go into the trenches and put themselves under the commanding officer there; with the 500 he will march to the left of the enemy’s line, remain as near them as he possibly can without being seen, until four o’clock in the morning, at which time the troops in the trenches will begin an attack upon the enemy; he will then advance and make his attack as near the river as possible; though this is only meant as a feint, yet should a favorable opportunity offer, he will improve it and push into the town.

“In case of a repulse after taking Springhill redoubt, the troops will retreat and rally in the rear of the redoubt; if it cannot be effected that way, it must be attempted by the same route at which they entered.

“The second place of rallying (or the first if the redoubt should not be carried) will be at the Jews’ burying-ground, where the reserve will be placed; if these two halts should not be effected, they will retire towards camp.

“The troops will carry in their hats a piece of white paper by which they will be distinguished.”

General Huger with his five hundred militia, covered by the river swamp, crept quite close to the enemy’s lines and delivered his attack as directed. Its purpose was to draw attention to that quarter and if possible cause a weakening of the strength in the left centre of the line. What its real effect was, there is now no means of knowing.

Count Dillon, who during the siege had been on D’Estaing’s right, and who appears to have been second in command in the French army, in this assault was

placed in command of a second attacking column. His purpose was to move to the right of General Huger, and keeping in the edge of the swamps along the river, steal past the enemy's batteries on the left, and attack him in the rear. Bancroft describes the results of his efforts as follows: "The column under Count Dillon, which was to have attacked the rear of the British lines, became entangled in a swamp of which it should only have skirted the edge was helplessly exposed to the British batteries and could not even be formed." Here were the two strong sand-filled redoubts, mounted with heavy cannon, and these may have been the batteries that stopped Dillon's column.

Count Pulaski with his two hundred brave cavalymen, undertook his part in the deadly drama with ardor, and began that perilous ride which had for its object: "to penetrate the enemy's lines, between the battery on the left of the Springhill redoubt, and the next towards the river." Balch describes it as an attempt to "penetrate into the city by galloping between the redoubts." It was the anticipation of the Crimean "Charge of the Light Brigade;" only in this case, no one blundered; it was simply a desperate chance. Cannon were to the right, left, and front, and the heroic charge proved in vain; the noble Pole fell, banner in hand, pierced with a mortal wound—another foreign martyr to our dear bought freedom.

The cavalry dash having failed, that much of the general plan was blotted out. The feints may have been understood; it is said a sergeant of the Charleston Grenadiers deserted during the night of the 8th and gave the whole plan of the attack to General Prevost, so that he knew just where to strengthen his lines. The feints were effectually checked by the garrison on the left, twenty-eight of the Americans being killed; while Dillon's column was stopped by the batteries near the river. This state of affairs allowed the whole of Maitland's force to protect the Springhill redoubt and that part of the line which was most threatened. The Springhill redoubt, as has been stated, was occupied by the South Carolina regiment and a corps of dragoons. This circumstance may account for the fact, that while the three hundred and fifty Charleston militia occupied a most exposed position in the attacking column, only one man among them was killed and but six wounded. The battery on the left of this redoubt was garrisoned by grenadiers and marines.

The attacking column now advanced boldly, under the command of D'Estaing and Lincoln, the Americans consisting of six hundred continental troops and three hundred and fifty Charleston militia, being on the left, while the centre and right were made up of the French forces. They were met with so severe and

steady a fire that the head of the column was soon thrown into confusion. They endured this fire for fifty-five minutes, returning it as best they could, although many of the men had no opportunity to fire at all. Two American standards, and one French standard, were placed on the British works, but their bearers were instantly killed. It being found impossible to carry any part of the works, a general retreat was ordered. Of the six hundred continental troops, more than one-third had fallen, and about one-fifth of the French. The Charleston militia had not suffered, although they had bravely borne their part in the assault, and it had certainly been no fault of theirs if their brethren behind the enbankments had not fired upon them. Count D'Estaing had received two wounds, one in the thigh, and being unable to move, was saved by the young naval lieutenant Truguet. Ramsey gives the losses of the battle as follows: French soldiers 760; officers 61; Americans 312; total 1133.

As the army began its retreat, Lieutenant-colonel Maitland with the grenadiers, and marines who were incorporated with the grenadiers, charged its rear with the purpose of accomplishing its annihilation. It was then that there occurred the most brilliant feat of the day, and one of the bravest ever performed by foreign troops in the American cause. In the army of D'Estaing was a legion of black and mulatto freedmen, known as Fontages Legion, commanded by Vicount de Fontages, a brave and experienced officer. The strength of this legion is given variously from six hundred to over eight hundred men. This legion met the fierce charge of Maitland and saved the retreating army.

In an official record prepared in Paris, now before me, are these words: "This legion saved the army at Savannah by bravely covering its retreat. Among the blacks who rendered signal services at that time were: Andre, Beauvais, Rigaud, Villatte, Beauregard, Lambert, who latterly became generals under the convention, including Henri Christophe, the future king of Haiti." This quotation is taken from a paper secured by the Honorable Richard Rush, our minister to Paris in 1849, and is preserved in the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Henri Christophe received a dangerous gunshot wound in Savannah. Balch says in speaking of Fontages at Savannah: "He commanded there a legion of mulattoes, according to my manuscript, of more than eight hundred men, and saved the army after the useless assault on the fortifications, by bravely covering the retreat."

It was this legion that formed the connecting link between the siege of Savannah and the wide development of republican liberty on the Western continent, which followed early in the present century. In order to show this connection and the

sequences, it will be necessary to sketch in brief the history of this remarkable body of men, especially that of the prominent individuals who distinguished themselves at Savannah.

In 1779 the French colony of Saint Domingo was in a state of peace, the population then consisting of white slaveholders, mulatto and black freedmen (affranchis), and slaves. Count D'Estaing received orders to recruit men from Saint Domingo for the auxiliary army; and there being no question of color raised, received into the service a legion of colored freedmen. There had been for years a colored militia in Saint Domingo, and as early as 1716, the Marquis de Chateau-Morand, then governor of the colony, made one Vincent, the Captain-general of all the colored militia in the vicinity of the Cape. This Captain Vincent died in 1780 at the reputed age of 120 years. He was certainly of great age, for he had been in the siege of Carthagenia in 1697, was taken prisoner, afterwards liberated by exchange and presented to Louis XIV, and fought in the German war under Villars. Moreau de St. Mery, in his description of Vincent incidentally mentions the Savannah expedition. He says: "I saw him (Vincent) the year preceding his death, recalling his ancient prowess to the men of color who were enrolling themselves for the expedition to Savannah; and showing in his descendants who were among the first to offer themselves, that he had transmitted his valor. Vincent, the good Captain Vincent, had a most pleasing countenance; and the contrast of his black skin with his white hair produced an effect that always commanded respect."

The Haytian historian, Enclus Robin, says when the call for volunteers reached Saint Domingo: "eight hundred young freedmen, blacks and mulattoes, offered themselves to take part in the expedition;" that they went and "fought valiantly; and returned to Saint Domingo covered with glory." Madiou, another Haytian historian of the highest respectability says: "A crowd of young men, black and colored, enlisted with the French troops and left for the continent. They covered themselves with glory in the siege of Savannah, under the orders of Count D'Estaing."

What effect this experience had upon these volunteers may be inferred from their subsequent history. Robin says: "These men who contributed their mite toward American independence, had still their mothers and sisters in slavery; and they themselves were subject to humiliating discriminations. Should not France have expected from that very moment, that they would soon use in their own cause, those very arms which they had learned so well to use in the interests of others?" Madiou says: "On their return to Saint Domingo they demanded for their

brothers the enjoyment of political rights.” Beauvais went to Europe and served in the army of France; but returned to fight for liberty in Hayti, and was Captain-general in 1791: Rigaud, Lambert and Christophe wrote their names—not in the sand. These are the men who dared to stir Saint Domingo, under whose influence Hayti became the first country of the New World, after the United States, to throw off European rule. The connection between the siege of Savannah and the independence of Hayti is traced, both as to its spirit, and physically, through the black legion that on that occasion saved the American army. How this connection is traced to the republics of South America, I will allow a Haytian statesman and man of letters, honored both at home and abroad, to relate. I translate from a work published in Paris in 1885:

“The illustrious Bolivar, liberator and founder of five republics in South America, undertook in 1811 his great work of shaking off the yoke of Spain, and of securing the independence of those immense countries which swelled the pride of the catholic crown—but failed. Stripped of all resources he took flight and repaired to Jamaica, where he implored in vain of the governor of that island, the help of England. Almost in despair, and without means, he resolved to visit Hayti, and appeal to the generosity of the black Republic for the help necessary to again undertake that work of liberation which had gone to pieces in his hands. Never was there a more solemn hour for any man—and that man the representative of the destiny of South America! Could he hope for success? After the English, who had every interest in the destruction of Spanish colonial power, had treated him with so much indifference, could he hope that a newborn nation, weak, with microscopic territory, and still guarding anxiously its own ill-recognized independence, would risk itself in an enterprise hazardous as the one he represented? Full of doubt he came: but Petion gave him a most cordial welcome.

“Taking the precautions that a legitimate sentiment of prudence dictated at that delicate moment of our national existence, the government of Port-au-Prince put to the disposition of the hero of Boyaca and Carabobo, all the elements, of which he had need—and Bolivar needed everything. Men, arms, and money were generously given him. Petion did not wish to act openly for fear of compromising himself with the Spanish government; it was arranged that the men should embark secretly as volunteers; and that no mention of Hayti should ever be made in any official act of Venezuela.”

Bolivar’s first expedition with his Haytian volunteers was a failure; returning to the island he procured reinforcements and made a second descent which was

brilliantly successful. Haytian arms, money, and men turned Bolivar's disasters to victory; and the spirit of Western liberty marched on to the redemption of South America. The liberation of Mexico and all Central America, followed as a matter of course; and the ground was thus cleared for the practical application of that Continentalism enunciated in the Monroe doctrine.

The black men of the Antilles who fought in the siege of Savannah, enjoy unquestionably the proud historical distinction of being the physical conductors that bore away from our altars the sacred fire of liberty to rekindle it in their own land; and also of becoming the humble but important link that served to unite the Two Americas in the bond of enlightened independence.

T. G. STEWARD, U. S. A.

NOTE: In the preparation of the above paper I have been greatly assisted by the Honorable L. J. Janvier, Chargè d'affaires d'Hayti, in London; by Right Reverend James Theodore Holly, bishop of Hayti; and by Messrs. Charles and Frank Rudolph Steward of Harvard University. To all of these gentlemen my thanks are here expressed. T. G. S.

Footnote:

[1]The presentation of this banner by the Moravian Nuns of Bethlehem forms the text of the poem by Longfellow beginning,—

When the dying flame of day
Through the chancel shot its ray,
Far the glimmering tapers shed
Faint light on the cowed head;
And the censer burning swung,
Where, before the altar, hung
The crimson banner, that with prayer
Had been consecrated there.
And the nuns' sweet hymn was heard the while,

Sung low in the dim, mysterious aisle.
 "Take thy banner! may it wave
 Proudly o'er the good and brave;
 When the battle's distant wail
 Breaks the Sabbath of our vale.
 When the cannon's music thrills
 To the hearts of those lone hills,
 When the spear in conflict shakes,
 And the strong lance shivering breaks.
 .
 .
 .
 .
 "Take thy banner! and if e'er
 Thou shouldst press the soldier's bier,
 And the muffled drum shall beat
 To the tread of mournful feet,
 Then the crimson flag shall be
 Martial cloak and shroud for thee."
The warrior took that banner proud,
 And it was his martial cloak and shroud!

Transcriber's Note:

Other than the corrections noted by hover information, printer's spelling and hyphenation usage have been retained.

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